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Using a nationally representative survey (N = 4,612), we analyze whether there is a difference in the Netherlands between cohabiting and married persons with regard to the frequency of contact with one's own family as well as the parents of the partner. Clustered regression analyses show that, as expected, cohabiting persons have less contact with family members. Results are consistent with the selection perspective, which attributes the lower levels of contact to background characteristics, influencing the orientation of the cohabiting toward family. The uncertainty perspective, which attributes the lower levels of contact with the parents of the partner to the greater uncertainty regarding the stability of cohabiting relationships, is partially supported.

Since the 1970s, unmarried cohabitation has steadily gained popularity in the Western world. Before then, it was restricted to either the very poor who could not afford a wedding or to a small group of intellectuals who viewed marriage as a bourgeois institution. In recent decades, however, rates of cohabitation have been increasing in all social groups (Kiernan, 2001; Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2000; Seltzer, 2004). Given the increased prevalence, it is important to include unmarried cohabitation in today's studies of family life.

Although more and more research is being done on unmarried cohabitation, it tends to focus on the characteristics of the relationship itself. Typical findings are that cohabiting couples are less likely than married couples to have a gender-based division of tasks (e.g., Brines & Joyner, 1999) and that their relationships are more prone to dissolution (Manting, 1994). The question of whether the family ties of married and cohabiting couples differ has rarely been addressed empirically. Nonetheless, several scholars have suggested that the increase in cohabitation is one of the driving forces behind the decline of the family (Popenoe, 1993; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). But is this suggestion justified and are cohabiting couples weak links in family networks? And if so, how can this be explained?

We develop a theoretical framework consisting of a selection perspective and an uncertainty perspective (cf. Eggebeen, 2005) to reach an understanding of differences between cohabiting and married persons in the frequency of contact with family members. Data availability considerations have guided the focus on frequency of contact. Our analyses are based on the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra et al., 2005), which has information on contact frequency for a wide range of family members.

The explanation in terms of selection focuses on background characteristics of the cohabiting

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and married. The basic assumption is that these characteristics not only underlie union formation choices but are also associated with a person's family orientation, which, in turn, shapes the frequency of contact with family members. Previous research has revealed a number of differences in the background characteristics of cohabiting and married persons. The cohabiting are more likely to be well educated (Manting, 1996) and nonreligious (Manting, 1996), to have experienced parental divorce (Kiernan, 2001) or the disruption of a former partnership (Bumpass & Lu, 2000), to live in an urban area (Manting, 1996) or further away from family (Kalmijn, 2006), to have modern values regarding family issues (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995), and to have fewer children (Kiernan, 2001). Several of these characteristics, such as high educational attainment (Kalmijn, 2006), nontraditional family values (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), urban residence (Kalmijn, 2003), and living further away from family (Kalmijn, 2006), are inversely associated with the level of contact with family members. On the basis of the previous considerations, we arrive at our first hypothesis: The difference between cohabiting and married respondents in the frequency of contact with family members is attributable to differences in background characteristics.

Uncertainty, the second perspective in our theoretical framework, is based on social capital theory. Researchers have recently started to treat family relationships as a form of social capital (Furstenberg, 2005). A typical characteristic of capital is that it is acquired through investments (Coleman, 1990; Flap, 1999), with investments in social capital being made through varying levels of contact. As for other forms of capital, considerations of uncertainty regarding future benefits shape the investments in family relationships (Dixit & Pindyck, 1994; Portes, 1998): The greater the uncertainty, the fewer the investments.

We propose that the uncertainty regarding future benefits of family relationships varies by partnership type. It is greater in cohabiting than in marital unions because, as noted earlier, the former are more prone to dissolution. The certainty that social investments will pay off varies furthermore by legal arrangement (see Bradley, 2001, for a detailed discussion of the different legal partnership arrangements in the Netherlands). We distinguish marriages contracted in common property from those contracted on the basis of a prenuptial agreement. In addition, we distinguish cohabitations with a partnership registration, those with a cohabitation contract, and those without any legal arrangement. These partnership arrangements differ in the extent to which they are legally binding (Giesen, 1999), shaping the difficulty of ending the relationship. From most to least binding, the order is marriage in common property, marriage with a prenuptial agreement, cohabitation with a partnership registration, cohabitation with a contract, and cohabitation with no contract.

Uncertainty considerations are particularly important for relationships with the partner's family. The dissolution of a partnership is typically accompanied by a diminution of contacts with the partner's family (Duran-Aydintug, 1993). The investments in ties with in-laws can thus be seen as relation-specific investments that one stands to lose when the partnership ends (Brüderl & Kalter, 2001; Giesen, 1999). Following the previous considerations, we arrive at the second hypothesis: The more legally binding a person's union is, the greater the frequency of contact with the partner's family.

Note that there are competing interpretations for the selection and uncertainty perspectives. With regard to the selection perspective, we have assumed that the background characteristics represent selection solely. It is conceivable, however, that people's union type also has implications for their attitudes and behavior. For example, being in an unmarried cohabiting relationship decreases the likelihood of becoming a parent (De Rose & Racioppi, 2001). The arrival of children, in turn, leads to an increase in interactions with family members (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). Thus, background characteristics headed under the selection perspective might be mediating variables. Given the difficulty of unraveling selection and mediating effects in the absence of life history data, no distinction is made in the analyses.

Regarding the uncertainty perspective, we have assumed that more uncertainty about the future of the partnership implies less investment in ties with in-laws. An alternative argument is that relation-specific investments are a means to reduce uncertainty (Brüderl & Kalter, 2001; Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa, 1994; Kalmijn & Bernasco, 1999): Greater relation-specific investments make it more costly to end the partnership. Given that this competing interpretation simply reverses the direction of the

association specified in the second hypothesis, there should be no difficulties interpreting the results.

Selection and uncertainty are not the only mechanisms influencing the frequency of contact with family members. One of the most consistent findings in previous research is that women have more contact with family than men (Moore, 1990; Rosenthal, 1985). Age and the age difference between family members play a role in family interactions as well, but the findings regarding the direction of age effects are inconsistent (Eggebeen, 1992; Fischer & Oliker, 1983; Kalmijn, 2006). Frequency of contact also varies by type of family relationship (Connidis, 2001): Interactions tend to be more frequent in vertical ties (e.g., parent-child) than in horizontal ties (siblings) and in biological ties compared to step ties and ties with in-laws. Given that time budgets are limited, family network size is generally inversely associated with the frequency of contact with a specific family member (Eggebeen, 1992, 2005; Kalmijn, 2006). The previously described determinants are introduced as controls in the analyses.

METHOD

Data

The data are from the public release file of the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, a large-scale survey on the nature and strength of family ties in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2005). Between 2002 and 2004, computer-assisted personal interviews were held with over 8,161 men and women ages 18 – 79 who form a random sample of adults residing in private households in the Netherlands. The response rate was 45%, which is comparable to that of other large-scale family surveys in the Netherlands (see Dykstra et al.). Response rates in the Netherlands tend to be lower than elsewhere and they seem to be declining over time (De Leeuw & De Heer, 2001). The Dutch appear to be particularly sensitive about privacy issues. Men of all ages, women living alone, persons under 30, and young adults living at home are underrepresented in the sample. Persons living with children are overrepresented. In the present study, the data were weighted to make them better representative of the Dutch population age 18 – 79.

The data were transformed into a file in which dyads of primary respondents (hereafter called "anchors") and family members were the unit of analysis. The resulting number of dyads was 47,503. For the analyses we first selected dyads of anchors who had a partner (excluding 14,724 [31%] dyads). Next we selected dyads involving family members who were living in the Netherlands (excluding 3,101 [7%] dyads), were at least 16 years old (excluding 105 [<1%] dyads), and were not children of the anchors (excluding 4,375 [9%] dyads). The final number of dyads in the analyses is 25,198, involving 5,032 anchors.

Measures

All measures in this study are based on information provided by the anchor. The dependent variable is the total amount of contact with a family member, which is the sum of face-to-face contact and contact by telephone, mail, or e-mail. The original answer categories consisted of seven categories of unequal distance (ranging from 1 = *never* to 7 = *daily*). These were recoded into a scale indicating the approximate number of days of contact over the past 12 months (ranging from 0 to 300 contacts). To avoid the influence of heteroskedasticity, a log transformation was performed (Kalmijn, 2006).

To assess the difference between cohabiting and married persons, we used a dummy variable indicating union type (1 = *cohabitation*). The explanatory variables were constructed and organized within a selection and an uncertainty perspective.

Selection was measured using the following background characteristics. An 11-item scale ($\alpha = .84$) represented the degree to which the anchor has traditional family values (1 = *nontraditional*, 5 = *traditional*). Examples of items are "Two men or two women are allowed to live together" and "Married couples with young children are not allowed to divorce." Church attendance was used as an indicator for religiosity. The original variable was recoded into number of church visits per year, ranging from 0 to 52 times a year. Dummy variables were used for parental divorce (1 = *yes*), having ever been married and officially divorced (1 = *yes*), and having children under the age of 6 years (1 = *yes*). Educational attainment was measured in terms of the number of years required to reach a particular level (ranging from 0 years for no education to 20 years for postgraduate training) following a standard

recoding procedure introduced by De Graaf, De Graaf, and Kraaykamp (2000). The degree of urbanization of the municipality of the anchor was determined on the basis of address density (1 = *not urbanized*, 5 = *highly urbanized*). Geographic distance was measured in kilometers and determined on the basis of the postal codes of the anchor's and family members' addresses. In the Netherlands, postal codes refer to small geographic locations (e.g., 10 houses on a particular street). To avoid heteroskedasticity, geographic distance was logged.

To assess the role of uncertainty, the following dummy variables were constructed (from most to least legally binding): married in common property, married with a prenuptial agreement, registered partnership, cohabitation with a contract, and cohabitation with no contract (for all dummy variables, 1 = *yes*). As stated earlier, uncertainty considerations are particularly important for relationships with in-laws. The data set has information on the partner's parents only. To identify differences linked with uncertainty on contact with the partner's family, a dummy variable (1 = *parent of partner*) and interaction-variables were created.

The control variables for anchors were gender, age (centered by subtracting the mean age of anchors), and the number of family members outside the household (including [grand]parents, and siblings). The control variables for family members were gender, and age (centered by subtracting the mean age of family members). Unfortunately, the age of the grandparent was unknown. We substituted these missing values by the age of the parent of the anchor, plus the average age of childbirth in the year the parent was born. In 1950 this was 33.8 years for men and 30.6 years for women (Statline, 2007). Dyadic controls were the absolute age difference (centered) between anchor and family member, the relationship to anchor (dummy variables for grandparent, sibling, stepparent, and parent in-law, with parent being the reference category), and an interaction term between the gender of the anchor and the gender of the family member to account for possible same-gender effects. The means and standard deviations of the independent and control variables are presented in Table 1.

Cases with missing information for religiosity and family values were excluded, resulting in a reduction of 2,027 dyads. Analyses (not shown) revealed no differences between the excluded cases and the cases with full information. The final number of cases was 23,171, nested in 4,612 anchors. Given the high number of cases, we adjusted our significance levels, with $p < .01$ being the lowest level of significance considered.

Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviations of Independent Variables* (N = *23,171*)

Variables	*M*	*SD*	Range
Cohabitation (1 = *yes*)	0.20		0–1
Traditional family values	2.00	0.60	1–5
Religiosity	8.10	16.55	0–52
Parental divorce (1 = *yes*)	0.10		0–1
Married before/officially divorced (1 = *yes*)	0.07		0–1
Has children < age 6 (1 = *yes*)	0.24		0–1
Education in years	12.01	3.13	0–20
Urbanization municipality of residence	2.98	1.29	1–5
Geographic distance to family member (log)	2.60	1.47	0–5.64
Traditional family values	0.65		0–1
Married in common property (1 = *yes*)	0.15		0–1
Married with a prenuptial agreement (1 = *yes*)	0.04		0–1
Registered partnership (1 = *yes*)	0.06		0–1
Cohabitation with a contract (1 = *yes*)	0.11		0–1
Cohabitation with no contract (1 = *yes*)	0.52		0–1
Gender anchor (1 = *female*)	0.54		0–1
Gender family member (1 = *female*)	43.65	12.75	18–79
Gender anchor × gender family member	58.81	16.51	16–110
Age anchor	17.98	15.35	0–81.12
Age family member	0.21		0–1
Abs. difference age anchor − age family member	0.05		0–1
Family member is parent (1 = *yes*)	0.53		0–1
Family member is grandparent (1 = *yes*)	0.01		0–1
Family member is sibling (1 = *yes*)	0.20		0–1
Family member is stepparent (1 = *yes*)	6.59	2.58	1–19
Family member is parent of the partner (1 = *yes*)	0.20		0–1

Note: Analyses based on weighted data.

RESULTS

Clustered regression models (Skinner, Holt, & Smith, 1989) were estimated to account for (unexplained) differences in contact between families (i.e., a particular "family culture" that influences all contact within that family). The clusters are the dyads belonging to a specific anchor. Given that the dependent variable is log-transformed, the model coefficients need to be interpreted accordingly. The coefficients are estimates of the percentage increase in contact when the independent variable increases by one unit. The estimates, however, become inaccurate when the coefficients are very large. The precise percentages were therefore calculated by hand and added to the tables.

Model 1 in Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis for frequency of contact with a family member that included only the dummy variable for type of union and the control variables. On average, the cohabiting interact with a family member 71.1 times a year, whereas the frequency of contact among the married is 82.8 times a year, a significant difference of 14.1%. Interaction terms between type of union and the dummy variables representing type of family member (not reported) reveal that this difference pertains particularly to contact with own parents (69.8 times a year for the cohabiting and 82.2 times a year for the married) and parents-in-law (23.9 times a year for the cohabiting and 36 times a year for the married). The differences between the cohabiting and the married in frequency of contact with grandparents (16 vs. 16.1 times a year), siblings (17 vs. 17.1 times a year), and stepparents (15 vs. 16 times a year) are not significant.

All but two control variables (gender of the anchor and absolute age difference) are significantly associated with the frequency of contact with family. The findings are largely in line with previous studies (e.g., Eggebeen, 2005; Kalmijn, 2006). Contact is more frequent with female family members and more so if the anchor is also a woman. It is also more frequent if the anchor and family member are younger. The highest frequency of contact is in relationships with parents, followed by those with parents-in-law, stepparents, siblings, and grandparents, respectively.

Before testing the selection perspective, we checked the underlying assumption: Do cohabiting and married persons differ in terms of background characteristics? The results are presented in Table 3. As the t test and χ^2 statistics indicate, all differences are significant, even after making a Bonferroni correction (Holm, 1979), and they are in line with previous research (e.g., Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Clarkberg et al., 1995; Kalmijn, 2006). For example, the cohabiting are less religious and are more likely to have divorced parents.

In Model 2 of Table 2 we examine whether background characteristics account for the difference in level of family contact between the cohabiting and married. After adding the variables from the selection perspective, the magnitude of the regression coefficient of the dummy variable for union type becomes nonsignificant. This finding supports our first hypothesis, namely, that the difference in frequency of contact with family between cohabiting and married persons is attributable to selection. A set of separate analyses in which the selection variables were introduced one at a time shows that each variable contributes significantly to the explanation of the difference between the cohabiting and married (results of Wald tests not reported here). The greatest reductions in the magnitude of the coefficient for union type are found for geographic distance to family member (a drop from -0.152 to -0.065), parental divorce (a drop to -0.116), and having children younger than 6 years (a drop to -0.122).

As the multivariate results in Table 2 show, geographic distance between the anchor and the family member is most strongly associated with contact frequency. A 1% increase in geographic distance implies a 0.27% decrease in contact. Thus, an increase in geographic distance from 50 km to 75 km (i.e., a 50% increase) is associated with a decrease in contact of 13.5%. Table 2 also shows strong negative associations with contact frequency for parental divorce and a previous marriage. Having children younger than 6 years and religiosity are both positively related to family contact.

To test the uncertainty perspective, we replaced the dummy variable for cohabitation by a set of dummy variables representing different types of legal partnership arrangements. Anchors married in common property are the reference group. We also introduced a set of parent of the partner $\times$ legal partnership arrangement interactions. As the regression coefficients for the interaction variables in Model 3 show, the less legally binding a union is, the less contact the anchor has with the partner's parents. Only the differences between persons who are cohabiting with or without a contract and persons married in

Table 2. *Summary of Clustered Regression Analyses for Variables Predicting Frequency of Contact With a Family Member (Log Transformed)* (N = *23,171*)

	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3				Model 4			
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	Δ in %	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	Δ in %	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*Δ in %*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*Δ in %*
Constant	0.416	0.059**			5.026	0.104**			4.388	0.060**			4.998	0.103**		
Cohabitation (1 = *yes*)	−0.152	0.038**	−0.042	−14.125	0.042	0.035	0.011	4.250								
Selection perspective																
Traditional family values					−0.003	0.026	−0.001	−0.291					−0.002	0.026	−0.001	−0.155
Religiosity					0.004	0.001**	0.039	0.351					0.004	0.001**	0.041	0.361
Parental divorce (1 = *yes*)					−0.296	0.05**	−0.062	−25.603					−0.301	0.05**	−0.063	−25.966
Married before/officially divorced (1 = *yes*)					−0.186	0.049**	−0.032	−16.978					−0.206	0.05**	−0.036	−18.61
Has children < age 6 (1 = *yes*)					0.122	0.031**	0.036	12.923					0.114	0.031**	0.033	12.096
Education in years					0.011	0.004*	0.024	1.139					0.01	0.004	0.022	1.038
Urbanization municipality of residence					−0.017	0.01	−0.015	−1.663					−0.017	0.01	−0.015	−1.676
Geographic distance to family member (log)					−0.314	0.008**	−0.318	−0.27					−0.314	0.008**	−0.318	−0.269
Uncertainty perspective																
Married in common property (reference group)																
Married with a prenuptial agreement (1 = *yes*)									0.027	0.041	0.007	2.730	0.086	0.037	0.021	8.956
Registered partnership (1 = *yes*)									−0.075	0.091	−0.01	−7.234	0.175	0.078	0.023	19.122
Cohabitation with a contract (1 = *yes*)									−0.033	0.063	−0.005	−3.279	0.103	0.058	0.017	10.82
Cohabitation with no contract (1 = *yes*)									−0.065	0.056	−0.014	−6.319	0.168	0.051*	0.035	18.27
Prenuptial agreement × parent of partner									−0.091	0.07	−0.011	−8.659	−0.061	0.063	−0.008	−5.935
Registered partnership × parent of partner									−0.214	0.134	−0.015	−19.268	−0.236	0.116	−0.016	−21.028
Cohabitation with a contract × parent of partner									−0.290	0.099*	−0.025	−25.208	−0.257	0.093*	−0.022	−22.627
Cohabitation with no contract × parent of partner									−0.491	0.088**	−0.054	−38.772	−0.461	0.079**	−0.051	−36.952

Table 2. *Continued*

Variable	Model 1				Model 2				Model 3				Model 4			
	B	*SE B*	*β*	Δ in %	*B*	*SE B*	*B*	Δ in %	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*Δ in %*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*Δ in %*
Control variables																
Gender anchor (1 = *female*)	0.039	0.033	0.013	3.927	0.048	0.03	0.017	4.962	0.038	0.033	0.013	3.872	0.049	0.03	0.017	4.986
Gender family member (1 = *female*)	0.081	0.023**	0.028	8.391	0.086	0.022**	0.029	8.946	0.078	0.023**	0.026	8.145	0.084	0.022**	0.029	8.791
Gender anchor × gender family member	0.399	0.031**	0.123	49.025	0.388	0.029**	0.12	47.452	0.4	0.031**	0.124	49.175	0.388	0.029**	0.12	47.412
Age anchor	−0.013	0.002**	−0.11	−1.25	−0.005	0.002*	−0.047	−0.539	−0.012	0.002**	−0.109	−1.232	−0.005	0.002	−0.044	−0.5
Age family member	−0.011	0.002**	−0.121	−1.059	−0.011	0.002**	−0.126	−1.099	−0.011	0.002**	−0.122	−1.072	−0.011	0.002**	−0.127	−1.113
Abs. difference age anchor − age family member	0.004	0.002	0.040	0.377	0.003	0.001	0.035	0.33	0.004	0.002	0.040	0.377	0.003	0.001	0.034	0.325
Family member is parent (reference group)																
Family member is grandparent (1 = *yes*)	−2.250	0.086**	−0.334	−89.455	−2.078	0.08**	−0.308	−87.466	−2.263	0.086**	−0.336	−89.601	−2.089	0.08**	−0.31	−87.618
Family member is sibling (1 = *yes*)	−1.583	0.055**	−0.544	−79.465	−1.495	0.051**	−0.513	−77.576	−1.575	0.055**	−0.541	−79.295	−1.488	0.051**	−0.511	−77.434
Family member is stepparent (1 = *yes*)	−1.227	0.082**	−0.099	−70.69	−0.969	0.074**	−0.078	−62.057	−1.239	0.082**	−0.1	−71.03	−0.981	0.074**	−0.079	−62.496
Family member is parent of the partner (1 = *yes*)	−0.751	0.03**	−0.206	−52.829	−0.768	0.028**	−0.211	−53.592	−0.639	0.038**	−0.175	−47.212	−0.665	0.035**	−0.183	−48.593
Number of family members outside household	−0.046	0.006**	−0.081	−4.481	−0.043	0.005**	−0.077	−4.218	−0.045	0.006**	−0.081	−4.442	−0.042	0.005**	−0.075	−4.155
R^2	0.266				0.37				0.268				0.373			

Note: Age and age difference were centered at their means. Analyses based on weighted data.

*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

Table 3. *Means Comparison of Variables Representing Selection for Cohabiting and Married Persons*

	Married ($n = 18,626$)		Cohabiting ($n = 4,545$)		
Variables	*M*	*SE*	*M*	*SE*	Sign.
Traditional family values	2.072	0.004	1.711	0.007	**
Religiosity	9.776	0.128	1.447	0.079	**
Parental divorce (1 = *yes*)	0.075	0.002	0.207	0.006	**
Married before/officially divorced (1 = *yes*)	0.054	0.002	0.128	0.005	**
Has children < age 6 (1 = *yes*)	0.247	0.003	0.201	0.006	**
Education in years	11.800	0.023	12.832	0.042	**
Urbanization municipality of residence	2.860	0.009	3.475	0.019	**
Geographic distance to family member (log)	2.586	0.011	2.638	0.022	*

Note: Analyses based on weighted data.
*$p < .01$. **$p < .001$.

common property reach significance, however. The cohabiting with a contract have 27.6% less contact with their parents-in-law, and those with no contract have 42.7% less contact compared to those married in common property. Previous research has repeatedly shown that partnerships make more of a difference in men's lives than in women's (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). That is why we tested whether differences in contact by legal partnership arrangement would be stronger for men than women. Results (not reported here) revealed no gender differences. In summary, we find partial support for the hypothesis that the more legally binding one's partnership is, the more contact one has with in-laws.

To test the robustness of the selection and uncertainty perspectives, we included both sets of variables in one model. A comparison of Models 2 and 4 shows virtually no differences in the magnitude of the coefficients of the selection perspective. Likewise, a comparison of Models 3 and 4 shows few differences in the magnitude of the coefficients for legal partnership arrangement. The findings are robust.

Discussion

Our study was organized around two main goals. First, we wanted to find out whether cohabiting persons are less strongly embedded in family networks than are married persons, as is often suggested. The findings lend support to this suggestion. On average, the cohabiting interact less frequently with family members than do the married. Note, however, that the association between being in a cohabiting union and having less family contact is not significant for all relationship types. Significant differences emerge only for contact with own parents and the partner's parents. These are relationships characterized by strong kinship norms (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). The normative obligation to keep in touch and to exchange support is stronger for genetically more close family members. Norms are also stronger for vertical than for horizontal kin ties. Of course there is no genetic relation with in-laws. Nevertheless, much social activity takes place on a couple-companionate basis (Dykstra, 1995), and then the genetic relatedness is on the partner's side. Our findings suggest that the cohabiting are less responsive to normative obligations than are the married.

Second, we wanted to arrive at an explanation for differences in levels of family contact. The findings clearly support the selection perspective, which posits that less family contact among the cohabiting is not attributable to their union type but rather to background characteristics such as being less religious, having less traditional values, and living in a more urbanized environment that, in turn, make them less oriented toward family. The findings also support the uncertainty perspective, which posits that lower levels of contact with the partner's family are attributable to greater uncertainty about the future of the partnership, which in turn is a function of legal

arrangements. The less legally binding a person's union is, the less contact there is with the partner's family. Note, however, that only differences between the most extreme categories prove to be significant: those married in common property versus the cohabiting with or without a contract.

Given the cross-sectional research design, we cannot disentangle causal influences. Such disentangling requires life history data collected over a long period of time. We cannot unequivocally conclude that selection is the driving force behind the difference in frequency of family contact between the married and cohabiting. It might well be that people become more or less family oriented depending on their type of union. The extent to which family members are supportive of their union is possibly the underlying mechanism. Likewise, we cannot unequivocally conclude that being in a partnership that is not legally binding is the basis for low levels of contact with the partner's family. It might well be that those who are less family oriented generally prefer both less contact with their families and a looser, less legal connection with their partner.

Our findings extend prior work on the family ties of cohabiting persons in a number of ways. Whereas previous research has largely been restricted to a subsample of family members, we have incorporated a wide range of ties. The wider focus has made it possible to reach more robust conclusions about the place cohabiting and married persons occupy in the extended family. A new insight is that the cohabiting tend to have lower levels of contact with family and that this is particularly so for own parents and the partner's parents. Another contribution of our research is that by incorporating the concepts of social capital (Coleman, 1990; Flap, 1999) and rational action (Coleman; Dixit & Pindyck, 1994; Portes, 1998), as well as using information regarding legal partnership arrangements, specific hypotheses on differences in contact with the partner's family have been derived and tested.

Our study used data that were collected in the Netherlands. As Kiernan (2001) notes, there are clear differences across countries in the Western world regarding the role of cohabitation in the life course. In the United States, for example, cohabitation is often seen as a prelude to marriage. Cohabitation is a trial partnership form, and marriage tends to be viewed as the desirable end state of a relationship (Cherlin, 2000). Although the number of people who have ever cohabited has increased, the number of unmarried cohabitants at one point in time remains relatively low in the United States (Seltzer, 2004). In Europe, however, cohabitation is increasingly viewed and accepted as a definite partnership arrangement. In 1988, Hoem and Hoem suggested that cohabitation would become indistinguishable from marriage. Today, this is the case in Sweden and Denmark, where legal and moral distinctions between marriage and cohabitation have disappeared (Kiernan, 2001). We feel that our conclusions can be generalized to other European countries where cohabitation functions as an alternative to marriage, but that one should be careful when generalizing the findings to the situation in the United States.

A limitation of our study is that, regarding the partner's family, we were only able to examine contacts with parents-in-law. The Netherlands Kinship Panel Study has no information on other members of the partner's family. We therefore have no empirical basis to ascertain whether the lower levels of contact with parents-in-law among those in less legally binding partnerships can be generalized to other members of the partner's family. Nevertheless, we see little reason to assume the findings might be different, given that all ties with in-laws are investments that are specific to a partnership. Uncertainty considerations hold for ties with in-laws generally.

The low response rate is another limitation of our study. It is reasonable to assume that it has implications for the distribution of union types (e.g., an underestimation of the proportion in cohabiting relationships given the underrepresentation of young adults in the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study sample). We see little cause, however, to think the low response has implications for the substantive findings. It is unlikely that the nature of the associations between union type and family contacts depends on the representation of the different union types in the sample.

Cohabitation rates have been increasing among seniors (e.g., Brown, Lee, & Bulanda, 2006). In the data set of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, cohabitation is restricted to younger age groups: Only 10% of the cohabiting are in the 50-plus age group. Given this underrepresentation, we were unable to examine whether the effects of the explanatory variables differ between younger and older cohabiting persons. There are reasons to assume such differences exist: Cohabitation among seniors is generally entered into after divorce or widowhood, thus introducing complexity in existing relationships

with in-laws rather than bringing in in-laws for the first time. Future research should focus on differences in the role of cohabitation in younger and older age groups.

This study has demonstrated the importance of selection into and uncertainty in partnerships as mechanisms governing family contacts. Viewing family ties as social capital in which one can actively invest is particularly relevant to the explanation of differences in levels of contact with the partner's family. Selection is more relevant to the explanation of the frequency of contact with one's own family.

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